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F.B.I. Inquiry Seeks to Learn How Times Got Secret Paper

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WASHINGTON, May 12 — The Federal Bureau of Investigation is trying to discover how The New York Times obtained a top-secret National Security Council document on Administration strategy for preventing the "proliferation of Cuba-model states" in Central America, according to Federal officials.

The bureau declined to comment on whether it was seeking to identify the individual who gave a copy of the document to The Times. But Federal officials said a determination had been made that publication of the document had had an impact on national security, and an inquiry had then been opened.

The text of the document was published in The Times on April 7, along with an article explaining that it summarized a meeting that took place in April 1982, attended by President Reagan and his senior foreign policy advisers.

No F.B.I. Confirmation

The summary of the meeting included information on both covert and political programs intended to keep the Sandinist Government in Nicaragua from "exporting revolution" to El Salvador, and to strengthen pro-United States elements in El Salvador and Guatemala. At the meeting President Reagan approved the policy.

According to the memorandum, covert activities in Central America would be carried out pursuant to National Security Decision Directive 17, which was the President's approval in November 1981 of a plan for covert action in the area, particularly in Nicaragua.

Federal officials said the F.B.I. had a policy of not confirming whether it was conducting inquiries into breaches of security. The reason, they said, is that confirmation of an investigation implicitly suggests that the information made public has been accurate and that the release of it has affected national security.

This is the first time the F.B.I. has conducted an inquiry into the unauthorized release of information since last March, when President Reagan issued a directive tightening procedures for handling classified information.

Use of Polygraph Tests

Under the new rules, Federal employees can be asked to take polygraph examinations, and the Government may draw an adverse inference if they refuse to do so.

Federal officials said, however, that it was the policy of the F.B.I. not to use the polygraph to supplant "normal investigative techniques," but only to reconcile differences that "cannot be reconciled through exhaustive investigation."

There is no specific statute explicitly making it a crime for a Government official to supply classified information to a reporter. Although it has been suggested within the Administration that one should be drafted, no action has been taken so far.

Justice Department officials say, however, that a number of existing laws can be invoked to prosecute unauthorized releases of information. Some of them carry penalties of substantial fines and prison terms upon conviction.